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## **Sleep Disturbances**

Most of us do not get enough sleep, often because we lack the time. Others lack sufficient rest because they have difficulty falling or staying asleep. If you have been experiencing sleep disturbances over an extended period of time, you may have a clinical sleep disorder. Sleep problems can also be a symptom of depression or another mental health condition. Learn the facts about sleep disturbances and seek professional help to diagnose and treat the problem.

### **Why we need sleep**

The right amount of sleep is important for the mind and body to function properly. Sleep gives the brain, as well as muscles, organs, and different body systems, a much-needed break. It helps us replenish our strength, bolster our immune system, and recover from illness and injury. It also provides a mental hiatus- a distraction for the mind from the complex cognitive and emotional processing that occurred during the day.

Sleep needs differ from person to person. Experts recommend an average of eight hours of sleep for adults every night, and more for children. Nevertheless, more than 100 million Americans do not follow this advice and end up getting insufficient sleep. Sleep loss can interfere with our ability to perform tasks involving memory, logical reasoning, learning, and mathematical calculations. Research shows that those who suffer from severe lack of sleep are also more likely than others to develop many kinds of psychiatric problems.

### **Causes of sleep disturbances**

There are many factors that can contribute to sleep problems, including:

**Stress.** Experts pick stress as the number one cause of short-term sleeping difficulties. Worries related to work, school, marriage, relationships and recent life events can interfere with a person's ability to fall or remain asleep, or to achieve a restful state of healthy sleep.

**Depression.** People who suffer from clinical or short-term depression can have difficulty sleeping. Others with these conditions actually sleep too much.

**Lifestyle choices.** Many of the substances we ingest and activities we participate in can greatly affect our sleep. Excessive physical activity, exercising, disruptions in our natural body clock (e.g., working the night shift),

drinking caffeine or alcohol, taking certain prescription or illicit drugs, smoking or tackling a stressful problem can contribute to sleep disturbances, especially if done shortly before bedtime.

**Physical problems.** A medical condition or illness-especially one accompanied by chronic pain-can make it tough to sleep well. Hormonal changes can also contribute to the problem.

**Medications.** Certain prescribed drugs, such as high blood pressure medications, can sometimes cause sleeplessness.

**Sleep disorders.** There are dozens of medically recognized clinical sleep disorders that can cause sleeping difficulties. Yet, 95 percent of people with sleep disorders remain undiagnosed. Common sleep disorders include:

- Insomnia (inability to fall or stay asleep)
- Sleep apnea (inadequate respiration during sleep)
- Narcolepsy (tendency to fall asleep rapidly at inappropriate times)
- Restless leg syndrome
- Parasomnias (e.g., sleepwalking, nightmares, night terrors, sleep inertia, etc.)
- Chronic fatigue syndrome (feeling very tired most of the time)

### **What you can do**

If you have experienced difficulty sleeping over an extended period of time, acknowledge your problem and seek help. Chronic lack of sleep can be dangerous and detrimental to your physical and mental health. It is estimated that accidents caused by dozing drivers kill as many as those who drive under the influence of alcohol. Talk to your doctor about your symptoms, and explore different treatment options.

There may also be underlying emotional reasons-such as an longstanding conflict, a marital problem, or job stress-that are causing the sleep difficulty. In this case, it may be best to talk to a therapist or counselor about your problem.

Meanwhile, try these suggestions to get the proper amount of sleep you need:

- Get up about the same time every day.
- Go to bed only when you are sleepy. If you cannot fall asleep within 20 minutes, get up and do something else until you feel sleepy.
- Establish relaxing pre-sleep rituals, such as a warm bath, a light bedtime snack, or 10 minutes of reading.
- Do not go to bed on an empty or too-full stomach.
- Exercise regularly. If you exercise vigorously, do this at least six hours before bedtime. Mild exercise, such as simple stretching or walking, should not be done closer than four hours before bedtime.
- Maintain a regular schedule. Setting regular times for meals, taking medications, doing chores, and other activities help keep your "inner clock" running smoothly.
- Do not eat or drink anything containing caffeine within six hours before bedtime.
- Do not drink alcohol within several hours of bedtime, or when you are sleepy. Tiredness can intensify the effects of alcohol.
- If you smoke, avoid smoking close to bedtime.
- If you take naps, try to do so at the same time every day, and for less than one hour. For most people, a mid-afternoon nap is most helpful.
- Avoid sleeping pills, or use them conservatively. Most doctors avoid prescribing sleeping pills for a period of longer than three weeks. Never drink alcohol while taking sleeping pills.
- Avoid bright lights at bedtime. Excessive illumination can tell your body that it is time to get up.
- Try to use your bed only for sleeping, not for watching TV or doing paperwork.

- Try taking a hot bath 90 minutes before bedtime. This will raise your body temperature initially. The subsequent drop in body temp is what actually makes you sleepy.

(Source: American Academy of Sleep Medicine)

### **Sleep support resources**

For more information on managing a sleep problem, contact these organizations:

American Academy of Sleep Medicine [www.aasmnet.org](http://www.aasmnet.org)

American Sleep Apnea Association (202) 293-3650 fax: (202) 293-3656 [www.sleepapnea.org](http://www.sleepapnea.org)

Better Sleep Council (703) 683-8371

Narcolepsy Network (513) 891-9936 [www.websciences.org/narnet](http://www.websciences.org/narnet)

National Sleep Foundation (202) 347-3471 [www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org)

**Call us for the support that you need. 1-888-290-4EAP (TDD: 1800-697-0353) or go to [www.GuidanceResources.com](http://www.GuidanceResources.com). Agency ID: FEDSOURCE**

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